NON-RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY AND MEDITATIVE PRACTICES IN FINLAND

Kristiina Vesanen
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HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

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Recent research shows that religion is transforming in Finland. The interest in institutional religion has decreased and more people identify themselves as non-religious while they are also interested in spirituality. Thus, it seems that religion is not disappearing, but rather transforming. This thesis aims to produce in-depth knowledge about the non-religious Finns and their understanding and pursuits of spirituality through meditative practices.

This thesis investigates the interplay between non-religious spirituality and meditative practices in Finland. This study has two interconnected aims: 1) it investigates how selected Finnish women and men understand their self-identification as non-religious, and 2) how they pursue spirituality through different meditative practices. This thesis employs a qualitative interview method to study the perspectives and experiences of the participants. The research data was collected through in-depth interviews with nine individuals, six expert interviews, and one focus group interview with five participants.

The data was analyzed by using the method of thematic analysis. The results how that self-identifying as non-religious means rejecting certain aspects of organized religion such as authority, dogma, exclusionary teachings, and anti-equality stances. Two participants who identify as religious espouse non-conventional and non-dogmatic understanding of being religious. The results of this study, on the whole, corroborate the findings of existing literature. This study suggests that the oppositional binary of religious and non-religious is limiting. Also, participants view spirituality as being free from an institutional authority, dogma, restriction, and offering a liberal view of life. In other words, spirituality in some ways is seen as the alternative to religion. Participants pursue spirituality primarily through different meditative practices,

which provide multi-dimensional benefits that extend to many aspects of their lives. As this study found a connection between spirituality and meditative practices, and also sexuality and intimate relationships, it would be worthwhile for further research to examine how certain spiritual worldviews shape understanding about sexuality and gender norms. Another area for further research would be how class, gender, race, and religious background shape meditative practices.

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1 Introduction

This thesis investigates the interplay between non-religious spirituality and meditative practices in Finland. The study has two interconnected aims: 1) It investigates selected Finnish women and men's perspectives on religion and their self-identification as non-religious, and 2) How they pursue non-religious spirituality through different meditative practices.[1]

Recent research shows that interest in institutional religion has decreased in Finland.[2] According to the extensive research done by the Finnish researcher Teemu Taira and which draws on various national surveys, more than half of the Finnish population consider religion unimportant.[3] There is also increasing and prevalent skepticism about the church's ability as an institution to provide answers to different aspects of life.[4] For example, a report mostly consisting of Nordic research shows that 28-60% of the population can be classified as belonging to a broad category including: atheists, agnostics, or those who do not believe in a personal god.[5] It is noteworthy that surveyed respondents prefer to identify themselves as non-religious instead of atheists if they have the option to choose.[6] As cited by Taira, The Church Research Institute's (Kirkon nelivuotiskertomus) report of 2008-2011 also reports that the popularity of fundamental Christian beliefs has decreased tremendously.[7]

Research also shows that religion is transforming in Finland. Interest in spirituality and various meditative practices have become increasingly popular in Finland. The researcher Kimmo Ketola studied this phenomenon, drawing on different surveys.[8] Citing a 2004 national survey, Ketola reports that 45% of Finnish young adults consider themselves religious, while 69% consider themselves spiritual (*henkinen*). Approximately 67% of those who identified themselves as non-religious also described themselves as spiritual. In addition, 31% of the respondents expressed an interest in spirituality and sought practices that provide a spiritual framework for their worldview.[9] Ketola also cites the 2005

[1] I use the generic term meditative practices when referring to any form of the participants' practices that they call for instance yoga, meditation, pranayama (breathing exercises), and mindfulness. When I refer to the literature, I use the terms used in the scholarship, such as spiritual practices, or mental and bodily practices etc.
[2] Taira 2015, 248.
[3] Ibid, 242-243.
[4] Ibid, 248-249.
[5] Ibid, 239.
[6] Ibid, 251.
[7] Cited in Taira 2015, 242-243. The church's four-year report is published by The Church Research Institute, and it covers current subjects related to Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church.
[8] Ketola 2007, 31-32.
[9] Ibid, 31-32.

World Values Survey, to note that 12% of the Finnish population have practiced meditation or some spiritual development method, while 3% practice them regularly, which is a considerable number of people since meditation remained unknown until the 1970s.[10] Another study by Ketola et al. also cite a 2011 national survey that reports that 5% of Finns meditate, and another 5% use some other method than meditation for spiritual growth, for instance, yoga or tai-chi at least weekly.[11]

This study is situated within this growing literature. It aims to produce research-based knowledge about the non-religious in Finland and their understandings and pursuits of spirituality. It is a qualitative study that is based on interview data with a small sample of individuals, and hence it is not representative. However, it provides close analysis of the research participants' views on religion; the meanings they ascribe to their self-identification as non-religious and their spiritual practices.

The remaining of this first chapter introduces the research questions and the methodology. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature. Chapter 3 and 4 presents the analysis of the data. Chapter 3 focuses on the research participants' perspectives on religion, spirituality, and their self-identifications. Chapter 4 examines the research participants' meditative practices and their relevance to their pursuits of spirituality. The thesis ends with final concluding remarks.

[10] Ibid, 31-32.
[11] Ketola, Martikainen, & Salomäki 2014, 161-162.

1.1 Research Methodology and Data

This study investigates two interrelated research questions: 1) How do the research participants understand religion and what does it mean to them to self-identify as non-religious? 2) How do they understand spirituality with respect to non-religiosity, and how do different meditative practices function as a source of spirituality? More specifically, I aim to explore what knowledge and skills the participants gain from meditative practices and how their way of life functions as a source of spiritual learning and personal development.

This study contributes to the growing research on non-religiosity and spirituality in Finland by investigating Finns who identify as non-religious and spiritual. Starting from the premise that non-religious identity is anything but homogeneous, the study researches the participants' layered perspectives and experiences.

This thesis employs a qualitative interview method to study perspectives and experiences of non-religious spirituality and meditative practices. The research data is collected through semi-structures interviews with 9 individuals, 6 expert interviews, and one focus group interview with five participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 individuals (five women and four men). The key areas covered in the interviews were: the interviewees' religious background; their understandings of spirituality, and their meditative practices and the meanings they ascribe to them. The interviewees were recruited through the researcher's network, social media, and message boards. Two of the female interviewees are the researcher's acquaintances who requested to participate in this research. Two other female interviewees contacted the researcher after a recruitment announcement about the study was posted on social media. Another interviewee was recruited through the help of one of the expert interviewees. Three interviewees were recruited with other interviewees' help, and one participant contacted the researcher by email after learning about the research from the announcement.

The age range of the individual interviewees was 27-52. They all practice meditative practices such as mindfulness, yoga, meditation, pranayama (breathing exercises), and tantric practices. Eight participants come from a Lutheran background and one female participant has an atheist background. One of the participants is member of the Lutheran church, and one participant is member of both, Lutheran and Orthodox church. Most participants hold a university degree. They hold jobs such as yoga teacher, music teacher, entrepreneur, project manager, lawyer, and consult. Three female research participants self-

identify as non-religious and spiritual. One of these three women also considers herself a believer. A fourth female interviewee self-identifies as non-religious and non-spiritual; while the fifth considers herself religious and spiritual. Two male interviewees self-identify as non-religious and spiritual. Additionally, one male interviewee identifies himself as religious and spiritual, and one considers himself non-religious and non-spiritual.

Although the original aim of this thesis was solely to research non-religious and spiritual persons, this study also includes two participants who identify as religious and spiritual, as well two who identify as non-religious and non-spiritual. These participants were included, since their points of view shed further light on the layered understandings of what 'non-religious' and 'religious' mean as self-identification. More precisely the two interviewees who identify as religious were included because their views and experiences of religiosity show the transforming understandings of religion and the limitations of the binary of religious versus non-religious. Those who identify as non-spiritual were included because their understandings and experiences of their meditative practices also show the limits of bounded categories such as spiritual vs. non-spiritual.

All interviews were recorded and lasted from 50 minutes to two and a half hours. Every female participant was interviewed twice, while a single interview was conducted with each male participant, since the women were more available. The interviews were semi-structured, and some of the participants were made aware in advance the key areas to be covered. The interviews were conducted in places suggested by the participants, such as a coffeehouse, participant's home, workplace, or meditation centers.

Since the spectrum of eastern spiritual practices is remarkably variegated, six experts in the field were interviewed to expand the researcher's understanding of these practices. All six experts (3 men and 3 women) are specialists in teaching eastern spiritual practices, such as yoga and tantra with years of experience. Three expert interviews were recorded, while the researcher took notes of the remaining three. The experts were recruited from the websites of the yoga schools. The expert interviews took place in different public venues such as meditation schools, the university premise, the workplace of interviewee, cafés, etc. The duration of interviews varied, with the shortest (with one expert) lasting ten minutes, and the average for most lasting two hours.

Additionally, one focus group discussion was conducted with five individuals. The aim of the focus group discussion was to gain understanding of general attitudes towards religion, spirituality, and eastern spiritual practices. The participants were recruited from the researcher's workplace the Finnish National Theatre. Four of these participants are female,

and one is male. Their age range is 27-35 years. Four hold a university degree and one is a high school graduate. All participants have a Lutheran Christian background, and four of them have left the church while one is an inactive member of the Lutheran church. The participants also engage in meditative practices and view them as their way of attaining non-religious spirituality. The focus group discussion was recorded and lasted approximately one hour and 20 minutes. One participant had to leave before the end of the session. All names have been changed to secure the anonymity of the interviewees.

Some relevant Finnish newspaper articles have also been consulted in this study to gain contextual understanding of the Finnish public discourse on non-religiosity and meditation-centered spirituality.[12]

1.2 Data Analysis Method

The interviews were semi structured covering these areas: the research participants' religious backgrounds; their views on religion; their non-religious/religious self-identifications; and their experiences of spirituality through meditation practices. The method of thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. This method was selected for its flexibility in interpreting qualitative data.[13] This method can be used whether the researcher is conducting inductive of deductive analysis or is guided by a particular theoretical framework.[14] It involves organizing and interpreting the collected data in ways that aim to identify "patterns of meanings" i.e. themes.[15] This type of analysis consists of several phases whereby the researcher first familiarizes herself with the collected data.[16] Then the data is organized under particular codes, i.e., identifying common semantic meanings. Then come several phases where themes are identified and refined. Lastly, comes the final analysis.

I found this method to be easy to use and suitable for my data. In this study, I applied this method within a deductive approach. That is, I was guided in my analysis with particular concepts (e. g. religious, non-religious, spiritual). I conducted the analysis in several phases: reading and re-reading the transcribed data; organizing it under shared

[12] *Uudenlainen henkisyys yleistyy Suomessa, ja se vetoaa etenkin nuoriin naisiin – Eveliina Holmin matka alkoi intiaaninäystä*. https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000006238321.html (Retrieved 14 September 2019); *Väärien kysymysten ystävä.* https://issuu.com/kirkkojakaupunki/docs/kirkko_ja_kaupunki_2020_2_helsinki (Retrieved 8 May 2020).
[13] Braun & Clarke 2012; Evans 2018.
[14] Braun and Clarke 2012, 58.
[15] Ibid, 57.
[16] Ibid, 60-69.

semantic codes and further developing this into thematic analysis that speaks to my research questions.

2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews the scholarship that informs this study. The chapter is divided into three sections. Section 2.1 introduces scholarship in Europe and Finland on the changing perspectives and experiences regarding religion and spirituality. In particular, I focus on those who self-identify as non-religious. Section 2.2 reviews the literature on meditative practices and their relationship to modern forms of spirituality. The third section (2.3) tackles the role of gender in perspectives on religion and spirituality.

2.1 Changing Religion and Spirituality

The influence of traditional religion appears to be decreasing in western societies at the same time that more and more people self-identify as spiritual. According to Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead et al., this change mainly concerns Christianity.[17] Religion, however, is not disappearing but rather adjusting with changing sociocultural contexts. Spirituality is becoming more attractive than institutional and dogmatic theology that is often perceived as rigid. Nonetheless, modern spirituality is layered and takes different forms. Furthermore, it may appropriate and change, in some cases, the forms and meanings of some religious practices.[18] The following elaborates specifically on the growing group of people who have come to be known in the literature as non-religious or the nones.

The Nones

The research of the British scholar of religion, Linda Woodhead substantiates the trend of the increasing number of those who are non-religious, and the simultaneous decline of Christianity. Woodhead's research in Britain found that the new norm among the youth is to be non-religious. As Woodhead calls them, the nones seem to come from all social classes and locations. Her findings also show that nones appear to have a global or cosmopolitan outlook.[19]

A spirit of independence is commonly emphasized by the nones. Following this spirit, the nones would turn to their conscience, reason, and intuition when making difficult decisions rather than an external authority. This way of thinking does not exclude strict personal ethics, but rather focuses on the freedom to choose how one wants to live life as long

[17] Heelas et al. 2005, 1-2.
[18] Taira 2006, 7, 23.
[19] Woodhead 2017, 249–251, 254.

as other people are not harmed.[20] The nones also adopt liberal views, for example on same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and abortion. They believe that church or state should not dictate norms, and adults should make their own decisions.[21]

A unique feature of the rise of no religion is that it is occurring without leadership or orchestration. It is not a movement people join nor is there a charismatic leader they follow. Rather, it is part of processes of personal decisions made by individuals one after the other, which has slowly and gradually led to this outcome. An essential trait of no religion is that it is undogmatic, but it is still not necessarily opposed to religion. In other words, the nones refuse the dogmatism of religion but not necessarily religion itself.[22]

Interestingly, Woodhead found that the nones do not pro-actively label themselves as non-religious, but rather choose this label if it is one of the choices presented in a survey. Their most favored option for self-identification is "spiritual but not religious." Thus, they are unwilling to be associated with both secular and religious labels. The nones also have a range of views about God's existence or a "higher power."[23] Despite the limitations of surveys as a research instrument with selected questions and answers, Woodhead's research demonstrates how heterogeneous the group of the non-religious is. Thus, more in-depth research concerning the nones is needed to understand how they make sense of their worldview(s).

In the case of Finland, Taira reports that the non-religious is becoming a new normal in the Helsinki area, especially among millennials.[24] However, non-religious does not denote anti-religious. Rather, it goes hand in hand with a strong emphasis on individuality and choice. Typical characteristics for the non-religious to be of young age, male, urban with liberal views. They tend to be critical of the public role of religion and the Lutheran church's position on a number of issues related to civil rights. Additionally, the non-religious are often officially members of the Lutheran church.

[20] Ibid, 253.
[21] Ibid, 253.
[22] Ibid, 256-257.
[23] Ibid, 254-255.
[24] Taira 2019, Multifaceted Non-religiosity.

Heelas et al. explicate on the new and complex relationship between religion and spirituality. They refer to prevalent phenomenon in modern cultures which they call the subjective turn. They explain it as a life lived by turning towards subjective states and inner experiences instead of external expectations and demands. This 'subjective-life' is the opposite to 'life-as' that is a life lived through external roles, duties, and obligations. According to Heelas et al., the current change and trend in modern culture is the turn from life-as towards subjective-life. For instance, if one has absorbed a role as a dutiful partner by disregarding one's subjective states such as inner feelings and desires, one is living in line with external expectations. If one instead aims to listen and act in accordance with their internal states, embracing one's individual "needs, desires, capabilities and relationalities," then one is living life in line with their inner experience instead of external expectations.[25]

According to Heelas et al., subjective-life is related to multiple personal aspects such as "states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, inner conscience, and sentiments – including moral sentiments like compassion."[26] Living subjective life means privileging one's subjective states and inner experiences.[27] A good subjective life consists of awareness, enriching experiences, handling negative emotions, and awareness of the quality of one's life and ways of improving it. Instead of following established paths, the goal is to find one's path, be one's authority, and become who one truly is.[28]

On the contrary, life-as subordinates individual needs and desires. The nature of things is seen as given and higher authority shapes the significance of life. Sacrifice and disciplining are perceived as virtues and elements of "the good life." Life-as may include roles that appear somehow as natural, and which one pursues unreflectively. In some cases, one may feel pressure and a need to adjust. Membership in a community or tradition, such as a particular religion is important. In short, life-as conforms to external authority, relying on the knowledge and wisdom of others.[29] Heelas et al. explain that the development of self-understanding has shifted to be more "person-centered" or "subjectivity-centered," and away from "a more hierarchical, deferential, life-as order of things."[30]

[25] Heelas et al. 2005, 2-3.
[26] Ibid, 3.
[27] Ibid, 3.
[28] Ibid, 4.
[29] Ibid, 3-4.
[30] Ibid, 5.

The distinction between life-as and subjective-life is thus also relevant to the differentiation between religion and spirituality. However, it is worthwhile to note, that these terms are not synonyms to the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality.' According to Heelas et al., the divergence between religion and spirituality is that the former expresses a commitment to a higher truth beyond this world, while the latter expresses a commitment to a profound truth that exists and can be found in this world.[31]

Taira's research also sheds light on the new processes whereby religion is changing and becoming more multifaceted; rationalization is diversifying the ways in which religion is practiced; and new forms of spirituality are emerging.[32] For example, Taira cites a 2003 study that surveyed individuals in Finland and found that 91% of the respondents differentiate between religion and spirituality.[33] Thy associate spirituality with "exploring the inner self, contemplation, seeking the meaning of life, praying alone at home, and fostering humanistic values." On the other hand, religious rituals, belief in religious doctrines, and studying the Bible at home are associated with religion.[34]

As Taira explains, religion and religious practices are transforming; they are not strictly attached to their traditional forms. Thus, sometimes religious practices are not even perceived as religious because they happen in new contexts and take on new meanings.[35] Furthermore, even though atheism does not equate with non-religiosity, Taira's research on the former is also worthwhile to be considered. He, for instance, found that even though the atheist discourse remains opposed to monotheism, nowadays, it makes room for spirituality and meditation. He explains, for example, that many bestseller writers of atheism count spirituality and meditation as a part of atheism or, if not spirituality, at least meditation practices are supported. Taira uses the term 'post-secular' to describe this discourse that combines atheism with spirituality.[36] It seems that while doctrines and belief systems related to religion are denied, religious services or practices may still be maintained, whether people have coherent or incoherent systems of beliefs and practices. In other words, meditation and rituals can be part of life without the doctrinal associations.[37]

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[31] Ibid, 5-6.
[32] By *rationalization* Taira denotes "sociocultural, scientific, economic, and technological development and rationalization." See Taira 2006, 11-12.
[33] Yip, Andrew K.T. (2003) "The Self as the Basis of Religious Faith: Spirituality of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Christians" – Grace Davie, Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead (eds), *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures.* Aldershot: Ashtage, 135-146, cited in Taira 2006, 24.
[34] Ibid, 24.
[35] Ibid, 7.
[36] Taira 2012, 388.
[37] Ibid, 398-399.

Another relevant study on the new forms of spirituality in is Janne Kontala's doctorate study about the worldviews of the members of Finnish non-religious organizations such as the Union of Freethinkers and Capitol Area Atheists. Kontala identified three different worldviews: The Content Altruists, The Experientially Spiritual, and The Communally Irreligious. The Experientially Spiritual is the most relevant to this study. Kontala defines this category as follows; "The Experientially Spiritual are more individualistic, reject traditional religion but are open to spirituality, and appreciate deep and nourishing experiences."[38]

They often engage in regular private spiritual practices (commonly yoga and meditation). Kontala's study shows that for the Experientially Spiritual people being spiritual is an important identity and framework through which they "view all event in this world." Kontala describes that this type of spirituality seems to be related to "sacralization of the self" or "self-spirituality" instead of private monotheistic piety. Other typical characteristics of the experientially spiritual people are: high emphasis on personal development; realizing one's potential; and exercising agency which is often accompanied with rejecting religious authorities.[39]

In other words, The Experientially Spiritual rejects religious dimensions that are group-orientated, ritualistic and authoritarian. On one hand, they still think religions (and religious scriptures) have value. On the other hand, they reject doctrines such as specific beliefs required for salvation. Kontala also explains that this category does not have an absolute understanding of their outlook, but rather they are open to revising their worldview, which Kontala interprets as a sign of their quest-orientation.[40]

In short, nowadays in Europe and Finland, turning away from institutional religion while pursuing spirituality involves processes of moving away from external norms, structures of authority, and dogmas as a framework that shapes one's life. It also entails an increasing focus on seeking a life where one is true to one's inner self, pursues one's desires and wishes, and exerts agency.

This study aims to add to this literature through a close qualitative research of the perspectives and experiences of a small number of Finnish individuals regarding religion, spirituality, and meditative practices. The findings of the study corroborate the main results of the cited literature. The study, likewise, reports the importance of spirituality for the

[38] Kontala 2016, v.
[39] Ibid, 152-153, 157.
[40] Ibid, 152-153, 157.

researched participants, their multidimensional understandings and pursuits of spirituality, and the limitations of the assumed opposition between religious and non-religious. A new finding is how individuals' intimate relationships (sexual and emotional) also become a way for them to pursue and experience spirituality. This is an area that can be further studied.

2.2 Meditative Practices and Pursuits of Spirituality

As noted earlier, modern spirituality is multidimensional and takes on diverse forms. Meditative practices are one of the pathways through which spirituality nowadays is sought and experienced. In this section, I review relevant literature that investigates the history of these practices in western contexts and their modern- day meanings and benefits. In addition to existing scholarship.

Geoffrey Samuel studied Asian spiritual techniques and their western adoptions and approaches. He reports that the *Indic Religions*[41] and their practices – such as yoga, tantra, and meditation – have risen to global recognition, particularly in the west.[42] These practices aim at mental and physical cultivation, towards the goal liberating insights.[43]

Samuel defines yoga, meditation, and tantra as:

> *"disciplined and systematic techniques for the training and control of the human mind-body complex, which are also understood as techniques for the reshaping of human consciousness towards some higher goal.*[44] *(…)*

Samuel adds that these meditative practices historically had distinct religious meanings, which are not necessarily the case in modern contexts:

> *For any readers who are familiar with yoga as a physical exercise, as one often encounters it today, it is important to appreciate that the physical aspects of yoga were historically a secondary part of a set of techniques that was aimed at training mind and body as a whole, and that (given some quibbles about exactly what is meant by 'religion') had a specifically religious orientation."*[45]

[41] By *Indic Religions* Samuel refers to early forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. See Samuel 2008, 1.
[42] Samuel 2008, 1.
[43] Ibid, 1.
[44] Ibid, 2.
[45] Ibid, 2.

Similar to Samuel, Ketola describes contemporary yoga and meditation as bodily and mental practices that arose in pan-Indian religious culture. Ketola suggests that a typical feature attached to yoga practice is "a certain methodological orientation and emphasis on inner concentration and quieting of the mind."[46] The attraction of the modern forms of these practices often lies in benefits related to health and wellbeing and not necessarily in their doctrinal content. Still, this is not always the case. According to Ketola, yogic circles have always had variable attachments to religious content.[47]

Two key elements of some of the modern religious movements in the west (after World War II) are individualized benefits and privatized practices. A common feature for these movements is that they offer personal goods that can be reached through privatized methods such as yoga and meditation. Also, the movements emphasize the individual rather than the community or family. Besides, these movements often require only lax commitment, and the teachings and practices do not aim to dominate all aspects of life but rather be significant only in particular areas of experience. Characteristically, they embrace change, aiming to offer something new, exciting, and exotic by deriving inspiration from traditions worldwide.[48]

Undeniably, a philosophical outlook that embraces change and novelty are features that distinguish these movements from traditional religion, which conventionally is resistant to any change concerning religion or society. Perhaps, this kind of flux might be one factor that attracts especially millennials. Since these movements privilege individuals and emphasize their freedom, they tend consist of strangers from all over the world. These new movements formulate "cosmopolitan communities" and "world communities" aspiring to resonate globally with the spirit "world as one and humanity as universal." The practitioners who tend to be single, often young, socially, and geographically mobile, share similar habitus "derived from the particular style of mental and bodily practices they are currently exploring."[49]

This study similarly explores the meditative practices of the researched participants, and their relevance to their pursuits and experiences of spirituality. The research participants also practice diverse forms of eastern practices such as mindfulness, meditation, yoga, tantra, breathing exercises also called pranayama, and relaxing or meditation in nature.

[46] Ketola 2009, 85.
[47] Ibid, 82–83, 85.
[48] Ketola, Martikainen, & Salomäki 2014, 163.
[49] Ibid, 163.

These practices, for the most part, are related to different aspects of their personal development and overall way of life.

2.3. Does Gender Matter?

Is gender a relevant lens from which to examine the aforementioned shifts in perspectives and experiences of religion and spirituality? The Finnish researcher Tiina Mahlamäki reports that research has found some gender-based differences between women's and men's religious views and attitudes. Women tend to be more religious than men; and men are more likely to be atheists or fundamentalists. The researcher notes that there is no consensus in the scholarship on the determining factors of these gender differences.[50] Additionally, international research found that women's religious dispositions and choices are complex. Although women generally tend to be more religious than men, women with feminist attitudes, on the contrary, tend to be non-religious.[51] Some of these women leave religion, and some pursue new formulations and interpretations that are positive to women. Some feminist women who identify themselves as religious discover new forms of religion and spirituality that are more woman-centered. Some feminists with atheist identity also experience the culture of atheism as masculine and misogynic that favors white western men. On the whole, a feminist outlook and masculine rationality seem to lead away from religion, but not necessarily from spirituality.[52]

This study, however, has not found any gender-based differences regarding the participants' perspectives on religion and their spiritual practices. However, there can be no conclusions drawn from this finding since the sample is small. The next chapter examines the participants' views on religion, spirituality, and their own self-identification as non-religious/religious.

[50] Mahlamäki 2012, 58, 60.
[51] Mahlamäki 2012 cites: Furseth, Inger (2009).
[52] Mahlamäki 2012, 62.

3 Non-Religious Spirituality

In this chapter, I examine how the research participants understand their self-identifications as non-religious and spiritual, religious and spiritual, and non-religious and non-spiritual with special attention given to the interlinkage of non-religion and spirituality. I have two goals: First, I shed light on how the participants construct the category of non-religious in relation to religion. Second, I analyze how the participants understand what spirituality means to them and its relation to religion.

The chapter consists of three sections. First, I describe the research participants' religious backgrounds and how they came to self-identify as non-religious (or religious). Second, I analyze the participants' perspectives on religion and how they informed their self-identification. The third section focuses on the participants' perspectives on spirituality and its relation to religion.

I elucidate that the non-religious participants have clear ideas about why they reject religion. They associate religion with authority, dogma, exclusionary teachings, and anti-equality stances. Spirituality, on the other hand, is a desirable and a valued life goal. These participants see spirituality as encompassing multiple dimensions, some of which are freedom from the authority of the church, and its dogma and restrictions, and adopting a more liberal view of life. The participants view religion as a restrictive all-encompassing framework that does not allow to explore other worldviews while spirituality has more to offer. The participants attach multiple meanings to spirituality, such as interconnecting different philosophical outlooks, reflection, seeking a personal path, constructing individual worldviews, higher power, intuition, rationality, and compatibility with modern science. Interestingly, the participants who identified as religious and spiritual, also walk away from traditional dogmatic religiosity but do not reject religion itself. For them religion and spirituality are interconnected. They view religiosity and spirituality are different names for the same thing.

In this part of the analysis, I draw on interview data collected from nine research participants, and the focus group discussion with five participants. My analysis is also informed by relevant secondary literature.

3.1 Religious Backgrounds

All participants of this study have grown up in Finland. Eight participants come from a Lutheran background, but none of them has had a religious upbringing. However, Ruth, one

of these eight participants, has extended family who are religious, and this influenced her perspectives. The ninth participant, Beth, comes from an atheist family.

Five participants consider themselves non-religious and spiritual. Of the remaining four participants, two identify as non-religious and non-spiritual, while two consider themselves religious and spiritual. I also examine the viewpoints of these four participants and aim to shed light on the differences and similarities between them and the other five research participants.

Despite the shared Lutheran background, every participant's path to their self-identification as non-religious (or religious) is unique. Ruth, who is in her thirties, is a yoga instructor and an entrepreneur involved in many different businesses. Ruth's mother and a paternal grandmother are religious while her father is non-religious. Ruth recounted that her father used to be active in a religious community in a Christian revivalist movement. However, he lost his trust in the religious community and his faith. Ruth was not brought up religious. Still, while growing up, she felt the weight of the religious teachings and belief espoused by her grandmother. She was religious until she went to confirmation school and ceased to find meaning in the teachings. Ruth lived with a sense of shame and guilt and felt that religion is a source of fear. She judged herself for not being a sufficiently good Christian, and she put in lots of effort to show her goodness. The religious teachings that she was exposed to also influenced her attitudes towards sexuality and sexual pleasure. For example, she felt a sense of shame about masturbation.

As a teenager, Ruth started realizing that religion, did not offer her satisfying answers about the meaning of life. She did not understand the Christian dogmas such as the Trinity, and she felt anxious about interpreting the teachings literally and believing in them without self-reflection, so she started to seek a meaningful life elsewhere. Nevertheless, unlike the other non-religious participants, Ruth remains a member of the Lutheran church. This choice is motivated by her appreciation of the work of the church in helping and providing free services to local communities, including her own close relatives.

Tess, a thirty-year-old yoga teacher-student, left the Lutheran church in her twenties. When she was 14 years old, she participated in a summer camp with her church friends, organized by a Christian religious movement. Tess clearly remembers when the other participants started to mumble what sounded to her meaningless gibberish. She felt the whole experience was fake. She later left the Lutheran church in her twenties. She believes that religions divide people, and that the teachings of the Lutheran church are not compatible with

her worldview. However, like Ruth, Tess still appreciates the church as an institution that carries out service work, and therefore, she could even consider paying the church tax.

A published author and consultant, Noah is in his early forties. After confirmation school, Noah was active in the congregation. He tutored confirmation students. The congregation was his community, and he felt the church was a safe place. However, in his twenties, Noah worked in a peacekeeping mission, and the cruelty of witnessing genocide and seeing all the mass graves made him reconsider God's existence. Noah's experience made him question why God would let it happen, and he started to turn away from the church. Finally, the church's position on same-sex relationships made him leave the Lutheran church.

Liam, an entrepreneur in his mid-thirties, reports several encounters that have made him reflect deeply on religion and move away from it. The first one was his relationship with his ex-girlfriend whose family was religious. His girlfriend's family disapproved of their relationship because Liam was not a member of her church. Liam could not understand why his girlfriend's family believed that she would go to hell just because of her boyfriend's different religion. Liam saw the family's position as hurtful to his girlfriend and made him think what the point of religion was. Another significant encounter took place during his travels in Europe when he had a conversation with a devout man who argued that it is the Bible that makes him a moral human being and keeps him from committing acts of evil such as killing another human being. Liam disagreed since he believed that one acts ethically as a human being, not because of religious teachings.

The turning point for Liam was Marita Liulia's famous multimedia exhibition "Choosing My Religion" that was held at Finnish National Gallery Kiasma in 2009. Marita Liulia is a successful Finnish artist who combines art, research, and technology. Liulia's work shed light on eight major religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto by juxtaposing them from multiple perspectives.[53] Liam describes how Liulia researched these religions and practiced each for three months. Liulia's museum exhibition combines art and fact. Her exhibition consists of "70 photographs, 12 paintings, interactive multimedia installations, religious objects, and two documentary films." Moreover, a part of her exhibition are computers through which the visitors have access to her factual online work. Liulia's art "focuses on the intense experiences offered by religions" and "the factual section highlights the role of religions as

[53] Marita Liulia: Choosing My Religion. https://kiasma.fi/en/nayttelyt/marita-liulia-choosing-my-religion-uskontoja-jaljittamassa/

our mental tools." She presents religions as an inseparable part of a culture.[54] This art and its underlying message made Liam reflect further on religion; concluding that it was cultural construct rather than truth that stands on its own.

Eve, a 52-years-old teacher, self-identifies as non-religious and spiritual. However, Eve also considers herself a Christian believer. The process of finding what religion means for Eve took 25 years. Eve's family is not religious, although they have a tradition of saying an evening prayer. Interestingly, Eve reveals that she genuinely wanted to become religious and a believer when she was young. She actively sought this, but she did not find meaning in religion and so she lost interest . Nevertheless, she continued praying and reading religious literature, including the Bible, and searching for faith in a Christian God. When she was thirty-six, she had a dream where she heard a loud noise and felt pressure in her head, and Jesus said to her, "*now it is gone*," and then it all stopped. She was unsure the relevance of this dream to her life, but she thought maybe some obstacle in her was removed. The turning point for her happened few days later, when she was reading a religious book by Merlin Carothers, who is a Christian author and the establisher of the "Foundation of Praise."[55] Carothers, who is based in the USA, believes he has a calling to guide people to God's path.[56] Eve was reading the book and as she turned the page of the book, the next chapter started with the sentence: "*now that you have made the decision."* The following day the world looked different to Eve. The book led her to believe in God and Jesus Christ, and the will to receive grace. With tears in her eyes, Eve told me, "*and God never breaks that agreement*." Yet, Eve also sees herself as non-religious, which I will explicate in the next section.

Rose and Julian are the two non-religious and non-spiritual participants. They are both in their thirties and left the Lutheran church because they felt it had nothing to offer to them. Rose said that although she did not have a religious upbringing, her family observed the tradition of saying an evening prayer. When she was a teenager, she discontinued this tradition because it meant nothing to her, and she did not even understand the prayer's content. Rose left the church in her twenties, after realizing it does not play any role in her life. She mentioned that the conservative Finnish politician Päivi Räsänen re-enforced her convictions about the church. A Christian Democrat, Päivi Räsänen, is known in Finland as a

[54] Choosing My Religion: Uskontoa jäljittämättä https://www.maritaliulia.com/productions-cmr
[55] Foundation of Praise is a church in California that provides services to e military, hospitals, crisis pregnancy centers, and prisons, as well as conducting missionary projects around the world. https://www.foundationofpraise.org/
[56] The Foundation of Praise. https://www.foundationofpraise.org

prominent voice against same-sex marriages. Like Noah, Rose reports becoming critical of religion and disliking its conservative attitudes, for example, towards sexual minorities. Rose admits that she is negatively disposed against religion and remembers how she was forced to read the Bible in Lutheran lessons at school. Rose used to think that believing in God was unintelligent thing, but nowadays she is more open-minded.

Julian, a 35-years-old entrepreneur, describes that his decision to leave the Lutheran church as uneventful; its framework simply did not respond to his value system. Julian says the traditional church espouses exclusionary values and antiscientific views.

Mason and Beth are the two participants who identify as religious and spiritual. Mason left the church in his thirties, while Beth is a member of both, the Lutheran and the Orthodox church. However, Mason describes himself as religious, because he sees that religiosity and spirituality as two terms that refer to the same thing. Everyday Mason practices eastern spiritual practices in front of an altar. He considers these rituals religious practices. Mason, who is in his late forties, is a yoga instructor and doctoral student studying philosophy. He has visited India several times. He notes that Indian philosophies and religions have substantially impacted him, but he is not committed to any sect. Mason, said he has been deeply interested in spirituality and especially eastern spirituality and philosophy. Becoming knowledgeable of eastern and new age literature and practicing martial arts and later yoga made him realize that the church had nothing to offer to him. He did not relate to the church's ideology, so he decided to leave the institution.

Beth is a masseuse who holds a master's degree in law. She is in her early forties and a mother of three children. She is the only participant who comes from an atheist family, and interestingly, she self-identifies as religious. Beth's grandparents were priests, while her parents rebelled against their religious background and became atheists. Beth said that her religiosity is not an act of rebellion against her parents but rather the result of her seeking. Her longing for congregation arose through eastern spiritual practices, which changed her inner reality, after a long search for God. After she was baptized, she started to self-identify as Christian. She does not see her Christianity at odds with her practicing eastern spiritual techniques. Like Mason, Beth thinks religiosity and spirituality are the same in the end. In her words: "*it can be called many different names, but the core of the matter is the same*." For her, love is the core message of the tantra and religious teachings that she follows.

Beth likens leaving atheism to opting out of a cult. For her, atheism is similar to traditional religiosity; both are exclusive and claim to be the only real worldview. In other words, according to Beth, an atheist can be as fanatic as a religious person.

In sum, all participants who have left the church elucidate that it does not serve their worldview and has nothing to offer them. Also, Ruth, who still remains a member of the Lutheran church, self-identifies as non-religious. The only exception is Beth, who renounced atheism and became a member of both Lutheran and Orthodox church.

Of the five participants who took part in the focus group discussion, four self-identify as non-religious, and the fifth self-identify as an atheist. One female participant is a non-active Lutheran church member, like Ruth.

All research participants in this study are genuinely curious about what constitutes a meaningful life and the complexity of the human nature. They all share an interest in seeking the best possible life, and they seem to reflect on these questions deeply.

3.2 Rejecting Inflexible Religion

In this section, I analyze the participants' perspectives on religion and their self-identification as non-religious or religious. I make two central points. Being non-religious is primarily defined as rejection of certain aspects of religion, but not necessarily as a well-formulated oppositional identity. Second, participants who self-identify as religious espouse non-conventional and non-dogmatic understanding of being religious, showing that the oppositional binary of religious and non-religious is also limiting.

According to the non-religious research participants, religion is a restrictive compared to alternative worldviews. On the whole, the participants define religion as an institutionalized and organizational system, such as the church. However, most participants hold the view that the church still represents some important values. The two religious participants also reject dogmatic religious teachings and understand their being religious in a new and unique way. Both men and women share a similar understanding of what it means to be non-religious.

Tess acknowledges that the church does valuable service work, but she is dissatisfied with the church's teachings that condone inequality and discrimination. She argues that the church has a narrow worldview and has nothing to offer to people.

Ruth is also discontent with religious exclusivity and rejects espousing any dogmas without self-reflection. She questions adopting views from external authorities. More

specifically, Ruth wonders why Christian teachings value suffering in this-worldly life. She asks critically, "*Is the point of Christianity that salvation is in paradise, but the paradise could never be here in the present life?*" Ruth experiences these values as negative and undesirable. She disagrees with teachings that allow only certain people to be chosen. In her opinion, people embrace religious beliefs often based on where they are born and raised. Hence, they do not have much choice. Ruth's opinion echoes that of Liam, who also believes that religion is socially constructed.

Ruth's concern also echoes Maija-Riitta Ollila's viewpoint, who has been interviewed in the Finnish congregation magazine.[57] Ollila is a philosopher who authored a book about artificial intelligence ethics. Ollila raises the question: how she can be happy while knowing many (non-Christian) people will go to hell according to the religious teachings. Ruth also questions why only a particular (religious community) is deemed as the chosen one and with claim to the divine truth and heaven. Also, Ollila emphasizes the importance of linking spirituality and joy. Similarly, Janne Kontala's study, also found that some of his research participants specifically reject certain religious teachings, such as the belief in salvation, for similar reasons.[58]

Notwithstanding her rejection of Christian beliefs, Ruth remains a member of the Lutheran church, because of the service it provides to communities. She also agrees with the teaching of the golden rule and thinks it is an important and valuable teaching to follow. Ruth is not exceptional in being non-religious while also belonging to the Lutheran church. These findings are also in line with those of Taira who found that membership in the church can go hand in hand with being non-religious,[59] and Kontala's research that found that non-religious participants can still consider some religious beliefs valuable while rejecting others.[60]

Liam associates religion with a narrow worldview. He believes it is an oppressive framework that controls the life of the follower. Liam describes religiosity as follows "*it is like a lamp-post, it illuminates only a little, but is easy to hold on to*." He means that a lamp-post sheds light only on a narrow area, but it may seem convenient to stay in that thin lighted area instead of exploring what is in the dark. Like Ruth, Liam criticizes people who do not reflect, but blindly commit to a specific religion that forbids them from exploring

[57] *Väärien kysymysten ystävä.* https://issuu.com/kirkkojakaupunki/docs/kirkko_ja_kaupunki_2020_2_helsinki (Retrieved 8 May 2020).
[58] Kontala 2016, 154.
[59] Taira 2019, Multifaceted Non-religiosity.
[60] Kontala, 2016, 154.

other religions and worldviews. Liam also links religion to the use of power. He criticizes the notion of an official religion in a country and sees it as a negative product of state power. He wonders if most Finnish people would have become Lutheran if the Lutheran church was not decreed as the country's official church.

Noah associates religion with belief in a book; with an all-encompassing set of principles, values, and dogma that regulate one's life. For him, although love is the central message of religion, the church focuses on dogmatic teachings instead of spreading love. Also, Noah admits that the church presents some important values, but he is unsatisfied with religious-based discrimination against sexual minorities.

Eve, who is non-religious, but a believer, describes in a critical voice religion as dogmatic, ideological, and a product of society. Eve explains that she self-identifies as non-religious because she rejects organized religion while believing in Christian God. Eve's worldview does not espouse the conventional understandings of religion as interconnected to religious institutions and non-religion as being lack of belief in God or higher power. She believes in Christian God at the same time that she rejects what she views as dogmatic Christian teachings. Eve recounted for example that some of her Christian friends regard yoga and meditation as white magic, which according to her denotes narrow-mindedness. Eve appears to follow her own path instead of an externally established framework. Eve's approach is interesting, and it certainly challenges the ideas that may at first be associated with non-religious spirituality and (religious) belief.

Beth, who considers herself religious, recognizes that religiosity is often connected to institutions and understood as a dogmatic system. Beth also views organized religion to be dogmatic. She believes that it often concentrates on other things instead of the core, which she identifies as love, like Noah. Beth assumes that religious dogma can provide completed answers for an adherent. However, Beth points out that non-religion can be equally dogmatic and exclusionary. However, Beth has a unique way of being religious: She combines eastern spirituality with Christian faith. Interestingly, it is her practice of eastern spirituality that motivated her to join the church congregation. In her words: "*The way religiosity is present in my life is precisely through spiritual practices*." By spiritual practices, Beth refers to eastern spiritual methods such as yoga, meditation, and tantric techniques. Beth said God is a vital part of her existence, which is not solely connected to her spiritual practice but is an all-encompassing way of being. Although she uses the word God, Beth does not espouse a traditional understandings of God. It is a notion of God that combines monotheism and pantheism. Additionally, in her worldview, while spirituality and religion are

interconnected, it is the former that is the foundation of her religiosity. Beth views her being a member of both Lutheran and Orthodox church as an articulation of her belonging to a spiritual community. Beth jokes that her multifaceted worldview might seem unorthodox and even heterodox from a traditional religious perspective.

Beth's understanding of being religious echoes Eve's understanding of being a non-religious believer. They both value their personal relationship to (Christian) God, and they pursue that relationship by being honest to their truth instead of external authority or dogma.

Like Beth, Mason also considers himself religious and spiritual and rejects the dogmatic aspects of organized religion. In his words: "*I am not afraid to say the word religion, and I can call myself religious*." Mason believes that religiosity is not decreasing but it is rather transforming. He said people are distancing themselves from traditional religion because of its current negative reputation and the widespread perception of its incompatibility with modern science.

Rose, who identifies herself as non-religious and non-spiritual, locates the problem she sees in religion in that it is God-centered. She believes that believers, (particularly conservative ones) are detached from the real world, denying their agency by thinking that everything that happens is the will of God. Her ideas and interpretations of religion are shaped by the Lutheran classes that she took at school. She concedes that she may be herself dogmatic in her rejection of religion and admits that she does not have much knowledge about religions.

Julian who also identifies as non-religious and non-spiritual, also associates religion with restrictive directives and rules that govern human behavior. He believes traditional religiosity is associated with anti-scientific views and thus presents negative societal values.

The views expressed in the focus group discussion were quite similar to those of the individual interviewees. Two main points were noted. First, the focus group discussion participants also expressed a strong rejection of organized religion, which is understandable since four of them identified as non-religious and one as an atheist. They associate religion with backward institutions and see it as being at odds with modern science. They see religions as oppressive in its teachings and norms. In the words of one female participant, who is a Lutheran church member, "*There is compulsion in religion, you have no choice. Religion is associated with what is old and rigid. There is no freedom of belief*." Second, the participants also found religion to be at odds with modern life and untrendy. Thus, they associated religion

and religiosity, with stigma, in particularly conservative religious ideas, which they believed were very unpopular.

The findings of this study corroborate the main results reported in the research of Woodhead, Taira, and Kontala as reviewed in the previous chapter.[61] The nones in this study, notwithstanding the small sample, reject religious authority, dogma, exclusionary teachings, and anti-equality stances. They express frustration towards the church's conservative and discriminatory attitudes. They believe that such religious teachings contradict the values of modern life, and they tend to search for a different pathway for self-growth and meaning. A common critique which they articulate is that religious worldviews do not allow exploration, reflection, and constructing personal worldviews.

Taira's research found that non-religious Finns are critical of religion's public role, while they remain official members of the Lutheran church, because of its social role and charity functions.[62] This study reported similar findings. Two of the non-religious participants, despite their critiques of the church, remain members. Also, most participants hold the view that the church presents some good values and carries out important service work for local communities.

Woodhead found that the participants do not identify as non-religious if the survey's limited options do not force them to choose that identity. However, her study participants are not keen on identifying themselves as solely spiritual either; their preferred self-identification is "spiritual, but not religious."[63] Thus, Woodhead concludes that while the nones, reject "scriptures, dogma, orthodoxy, and higher authority in general," "no religion is not constructed in conscious opposition to institutional religion."[64] In the Finnish context, Taira also elucidates that non-religious are not necessarily anti-religious, and if possible, the non-religious choose more identities than just non-religious.[65]

My analysis also shows that the research participants do not hold a strong oppositional non-religious identity either. Rather this self-identification is primarily a way of expressing specific aspects that they reject in religion. For some participants, this rejection is not necessarily a complete turning away from religion. There is a recognition, for example, of the social work that the church undertakes. Furthermore, my analysis shows the religious participants' non-conventional understanding of religion. They reject traditional monotheistic

[61] Woodhead 2017, Taira 2919, & Kontala 2016.
[62] Taira 2019, Multifaceted Non-religiosity.
[63] Woodhead 2017, 254.
[64] Ibid, 260.
[65] Taira 2019, Multifaceted Non-religiosity.

religiosity and combine different religious and spiritual elements that they adapt to their worldview. This shows that the oppositional binary of religious and non-religious is limiting. For example, Eve self-identifies as non-religious but is also a believer. Mason and Beth, while describing themselves as religious, share with the non-religious participants' rejection of dogmatic and exclusionary religious teachings. For participants, whether non-religious or religious, spirituality is very important. In the following section, I examine the participants' perspectives on spirituality, and why for them it an important life goal that has multiple meanings.

3.3 Spirituality and Its Multiple Meanings

In this section, I examine the participants' views on spirituality. I highlight three key points: First, the participants attach multiple meanings to spirituality, such as interconnecting different philosophical outlooks, reflection, seeking a personal path, constructing individual worldviews, belief in higher power, intuition, rationality, and compatibility with modern science. Second, some of these dimensions suggest that the non-religious and spiritual participants see spirituality as the alternative to what they reject in religion. Third, the religious and spiritual interviewees see a connection between the two, but they see spirituality as the foundation for their religiosity. Both women and men articulate similar viewpoints on the subject matter.

Five out of the nine participants consider themselves non-religious and spiritual, while two consider themselves religious and spiritual. I also discuss the viewpoints of the remaining two participants (Rose and Julian) who identify as non-religious and non-spiritual to compare them to those of the majority. The common factor among all participants is that they take part in some form of meditative practices. Overall, the participants have a reflective approach towards life, and spirituality seems to allow them to pursue diverse worldviews in a reflective manner.

Ruth, Tess, Eve, Noah, and Liam self-identify as non-religious and spiritual. Ruth, who has religious extended family members, says she has always been spiritual. As a child, spirituality for her was related to religiosity, while now she pursues non-religious spirituality through yoga. Ruth explains that she prefers non-religious spirituality, because she does not want to commit to only one ideology, and she seeks a worldview that allows exploration and reflection. Ruth believes what can be seen is not the whole truth, and there exists some energy or matters that can be known or sensed only by intuition. She likens this kind of knowledge to animals who have strong instincts. Ruth says that modern people have

lost the ability to connect with their instincts. Ruth expresses openness to various spiritual worldviews, and she believes anything could be possible, like a god, angels, life after death, and spirits.

Like Ruth, Tess considers herself to have always been spiritual. She says that she has always been open and a seeker. She describes spirituality as the existence of something universal to which everybody belongs. "*I believe that I am created from the same substances like other things in this world.*" Tess also values the possibility to construct her own individual worldview.

Noah, who believes in reincarnation, believes that spirituality involves believing in something higher. He uses the following metaphor to explain; "*The lights of a moving car in a dark night shine and lighten road, but this does not mean that the lightened part of the road is all that there is to it*." In other words, if something cannot be observed, it does not mean that it does not exist. Noah reflects that alternative spirituality is typical in contemporary culture, and he attributes its popularity to technology which has created more free time for people to think and contemplate, unlike the case in agrarian societies.

Liam understands spirituality very broadly. In addition to its being a personal path, Liam sees spirituality as connected to abilities such as critical thinking, reflection, self-management. In other words, he sees spirituality as having dimensions that can be explained rationally. But he also notes that there are also dimensions to spirituality that are intuitively experienced such as chemistry between people or energy that affects human interaction.

Although Liam admits that spirituality goes beyond the tangible domain, he denies the existence of a supernatural dimension. The supernational, for him, is simply another way of denoting the inability of the finite human mind to understand the universe. Nevertheless, Liam points out that the core of spirituality is not to search obsessively for rational answers to unexplained matters but instead to accept uncertainty.

Eve, unlike the others, pursues spirituality primarily through her relationship to a Christian God, and thus her pursuits may be called religious spirituality. She believes that there is only one real God whether it is understood as power, wisdom, or love. She elucidates that perhaps spiritual people who use terms such as "the universe" may be talking about the same power. She says, "*in my mind and in my view, all people are created in the same way by God, and everyone has the opportunity to come to know him, but it does not have to happen in a lifetime. It can happen after that*." While Eve expresses openness for other people's belief systems, she follows her unique spiritual path. Eve is actively connected to a Christian God through an emotionally intimate relationship that involves talking and praying to God. For

example, Eve believes in evil spirits that send negative thoughts to our minds, and she tends to exorcise them in the name of Jesus, or she asks Jesus to do so. For Eve religious faith is related to her personal growth which means for instance knowing herself better and controlling her emotions. Eve believes her faith helps her handle negative emotions. She does not see scientific and religious worldviews as contradictory. She says, for example, that neuroscience could explain how evil spirits work. She hypothesizes that the evil spirits may exist since quantum physics investigates fast-moving particles, and this could refer to good or evil spirits which are invisible to human beings. Moreover, she believes that science cannot deny the existence of God forever.

However, as discussed earlier, Eve does not follow a traditional path given by the Lutheran church. She rejects conventional religion and values her intimate relationship with God. Instead of the authority of the church, God is an essential presence in her life through intense emotions. Her appreciation of God is demonstrated in her tears which flow when she talks about how God supports her and knows all her needs.

For Beth and Mason, who identify as religious, spirituality and religiosity are closely tied to their eastern spiritual practices. Mason calls himself a "freelancer Neo Hindu." Mason acknowledges his worldview could be more understandable if he said he is just spiritual. He does not separate religiosity and spirituality. He sees that this way of being religious is just a new form of religiosity that is primarily grounded in eastern spirituality. He also sees the latter as compatible with modern science.

Beth sees religiosity and spirituality as interconnected. She follows the teachings of Tantra, and she is also baptized into both Lutheran and Orthodox churches. As mentioned earlier, her tantric practices have led her to become a church member, and she pursues experiencing the divine through her intertwined spiritual and religious practices. As tantric teachings instruct, Beth believes that every aspect of life is part of the pursuit of daily spirituality. In her words, "*All aspects of life are sacred, and thus I am constantly touched by the sacred*."

Mason and Beth have an unconventional understanding of religiosity, which is holistic, comprehensive, and open. For them, there is a connection between religiosity and spirituality, but primarily it is spirituality that enables their religious path. Both combine religious and spiritual elements into their worldviews. One could describe them as practicing spiritual religiosity, but one that is reflects new understandings of what religion is.

In very different ways, Mason, Beth, and Eve articulate new and transformed understandings of religion and spirituality. Mason and Beth on the one end, combine non-

conventional understanding of religiosity with very much open notion of spirituality, and on the other end, Eve combines non-conventional understanding of non-religiosity (entailing belief in Christian God) with religious spirituality that involves praying and talking to God.

Two of the participants, Rose and Julian, do not identify as being spiritual. Still, Rose's non-spiritual views have a lot in common with the non-religious spiritual participants. I analyze Rose's non-spiritual but reflective lifestyle more closely in the next chapter as her views seem inseparable from her meditative practices. From Rose's perspective, being non-religious and spiritual is odd. Rose supposes that spirituality is a current trend, and some people pursue a spiritual lifestyle by contemplating and seeking, and some do it by practicing yoga. Rose describes herself as a thoughtful person, seeker, and yoga practitioner, but she does not consider herself spiritual.

Julian, similarly, does not identify himself as a spiritual person. However, he is open to spiritual matters. Julian holds the view that there must exist some greater guiding framework for human life, such as the law of karma. He also believes that it is a basic need to believe in a higher meaning that guides one's life. Like Liam, Julian also sees that intuition (i.e., being sensitive towards matters that cannot be explained rationally) is related to spirituality and can even provide a framework or value system for some. In the end, Julian wonders whether he may be "*little bit spiritual after all*."

Similar views on spirituality emerged in the focus group discussion. Spirituality is understood as an alternative to religiosity in the sense that it provides meaning for life while not being dominated by strict rules. One female participant suggested that perhaps spirituality has replaced religiosity since spirituality is much more fashionable these days. A 27-year-old female participant in the focus group discussion said that religion is dominated by observances and includes the necessity of faith while "*spirituality is a fundamental way to understand the world, which does not require any kind of faith but is based on the question what is my worldview*." Thus, spirituality enables the freedom to construct one's personal worldview.

To conclude, the interview data analysis shows that the non-religious participants differentiate between religiosity and spirituality. They view the latter as open-ended and associate it with a more liberal attitude that welcomes diverse people. In other words, for them spirituality is an alternative to what they reject about organized religion, the latter being associated with the conservative and authoritative outlook. The two religious participants' perspectives, however, are different. For them, spirituality and religion are interconnected, but the former seems to be the foundation for their religiosity. Like the non-

religious, these participants also reject traditional religious dogmas while simultaneously incorporating religious beliefs and practices into their spiritual worldviews. For the seven participants who self-identify as spiritual, spirituality also has multiple dimensions that serve their individual needs and enable their personal growth.

In the reviewed Kontala study, the Experientially Spiritual do not espouse a rigid outlook. Rather they are open to revising their worldview, a characteristic which Kontala describes as quest-orientation.[66] Similar to Kontala's respondents, a main feature of the spiritual quest of the participants in this study is openness. For example, Liam highlights the necessity of rethinking his values and worldview occasionally. All participants also tend to criticize adopting ideas unreflectively. The participants also value critical thinking and exploring various options to construct a personal path that suits their individual needs best. In other words, the participants' spiritual quests are premised on their freedom to pursue a unique meaningful life.

In some cases, spirituality for the participants in this study also involves a belief in some kind of higher power or God. Woodhead's surveys also show the nones have various views about the existence of higher power or God. However, their God is considered different from the God of those who identify as religious in her study.[67] The participants in this study also present variegated understandings of higher power or God. It can be a guiding force, something that cannot be seen but it still exists, angels and spirits, and a Christian God. For example, Beth's manifold understanding of a Christian God as an all-encompassing divine is particularly noteworthy.

Most of the research participants agree that their pursuit and spiritual experiences are closely connected to their meditative practices. The following chapter examines these practices and the spiritual meanings attached to them.

[66] Kontala 2016, 154.
[67] Woodhead 2017, 255-256.

4 Learning and Growing through Meditative Practices

The focus of this chapter are the meditative practices of the research participants and the meanings they attribute to them. I examine, in particular, the relationship between these meditative practices and the participants' understandings and experiences of spirituality. I begin with background information about meditative practices in Finland. Then I introduce the meditative practices of the research participants. I describe what these practices are and their purposes in the participants' lives. Next, I analyze the meanings the research participants attach to these practices and specifically if and how they relate these practices to their spiritual pursuits and conditions. I conclude with reflections on the findings of my study and situate them in a larger discussion about modern-day forms of non-religious spirituality and their relation to (meditative) practices. I draw mainly on the interview data from individual interviews. I also include data from focus group discussion and six expert interviews. I also engage with relevant secondary literature.

All participants who self-identify as spiritual, except Eve, attach spiritual meanings to their meditative practices. Interestingly, one of the non-spiritual participants, Rose, also attaches similar meanings to her practices as the spiritual participants. Spirituality for the participants seems to be related to manifold benefits and a holistic lifestyle.

4.1 Meditative Practices in Finland

According to Ketola, approximately half a million Finns practice yoga at least monthly and typically, the practice is carried out in weekly yoga lessons. For only 1% of the surveyed participants, yoga is a part of their daily life functioning like a lifestyle.[68] There are different types of yoga and new forms constantly emerge such as iyeangar yoga, air yoga, laugh yoga, and Christian yoga.[69] In Finland, yoga practice can be carried out in specific yoga schools or in gyms that offer wide range of other exercises as well. The internet is also full of yoga videos that can be carried out at home.

As mentioned earlier, meditation remained unknown until the 1970s.[70] Although yoga has been introduced into Finland in 1950s, the number of commercial yoga studios have only started to grow in the 1990s and there are different forms of yoga these days. In 1988, a physically demanding form of yoga called Ashtanga yoga began to be practiced in Finland

[68] Ketola 2020, 25.
[69] *Joogan tyylisuuntia on yhä enemmän – Intia haluaa muistuttaa mistä kaikki sai alkunsa*. https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-8971920
[70] Ketola 2007, 32.

and started to establish its position and spread from Helsinki to everywhere in Finland until the late 1990s. The first Ashtanga yoga school in Helsinki was founded in 1997 and it turned out to be the largest in the world. Another historically relevant yoga school that also gained several students is the Yoga Federation of Finland which was established in 1969 in Turku.[71]

The Finnish ashtanga yoga school defines this yoga as physical exercise that develops "concentration, self-awareness, strength, and body control." The dynamic practice of yoga poses is called asana practice and the asana practice in ashtanga yoga includes a specific deep breathing technique. It is said that that in addition to strength and flexibility, the method accelerates metabolism, cleanses the nervous and circulatory systems, and improves the functioning of the digestive system.[72] The ashtanga yoga school offers mostly ashtanga yoga but also some other types such as yin yoga, pregnancy yoga, and meditation and yoga philosophy. The practices are usually carried out in daily lessons at the yoga studio. They also offer private lessons and lessons for companies. In addition, the yoga school organizes yoga courses, workshops and summer retreats.[73] Another yoga school in Helsinki, Shanti, offers different types of yoga practices in their weekly schedule such as hatha yoga, yin yoga, kundalini yoga, and other practices such as pilates and body care.[74]

According to Ketola et al., health and wellbeing are the main reasons for Finns to practice yoga. The authors also elucidate that whether the practices are related to spirituality or not is complex.[75] It seems that meditative practices are useful for diverse needs. An expert, a yoga teacher and a businesswoman who was interviewed in this study categorized the practitioners and their motivations into three categories: practitioners who seek spirituality; practitioners who consider yoga as sports; and practitioners who want to relax. For some, yoga is a hobby and for others it is a lifestyle.

The Finnish church's research institute has gathered some data on yoga and meditation. For instance, Gallup Ecclesiastica survey, that was conducted in 2019, surveyed 15-79 years old Finns to research how often they practice yoga and meditation and what it means to them.[76] The survey results showed that a remarkable majority of yoga practitioners are women, in their mid-thirties, highly educated, and urban.

[71] Ketola, Martikainen, & Salomäki 2014, 161–162; Broo 2012, 161–162, 25.
[72] Miten alkuun joogassa? https://astangajooga.fi/info/joogan-aloittaminen/
[73] Helsingin astanga joogakoulu. httpsastangajooga.fi
[74] Joogakoulu Shanti. https://www.jooga.fi/viikko-ohjelma/
[75] Ketola, Martikainen, & Salomäki 2014, 162.
[76] Ketola 2020, 23.

The prevalence of women yoga practitioners was also reported by Matti Rautaniemi in a book that researched how yoga has expanded worldwide. He explains that yoga, in western contexts is associated with physical education such as gymnastics, which in turn is more associated with women.[77] The yoga experts who were interviewed in this study also agree that most yoga practitioners in Finland are women. They also say that yoga is so closely associated with wellbeing which is also considered a goal that women tend to value and pursue. In addition to this gendered feature of yoga, the representation of the mainstream yoga in the West also does not reach diverse races and ethnicities, body shapes, and disabled bodies.[78] Thus, although Finland is becoming more multicultural and multireligious, yoga remains mostly white middle class Finnish phenomena.[79]

The profile of a Finnish meditator is nearly identical with the profile of a yoga practitioner. Similarly, the majority are women (though not as many as female yoga practitioners). Yoga practitioners are often also meditators and meditation is often part of yoga practice.[80]

Mindfulness is most popular of meditative practices. Mindfulness skills can be learned in Center for Mindfulness that offers various mindfulness trainings for individuals, organizations, and health care professionals.[81] The founder Leena Pennanen, who is a professional mindfulness instructor and a student of John Kabat-Zinn, the inventor of mindfulness-based stress reduction, brought mindfulness to Finland 20 years ago. [82] The methods of Center for Mindfulness are based on science and aims to teach stress control.[83]

Mindfulness is a tool that helps practitioners cope with stress, and it is also becoming more popular in Finland. Mindfulness is considered to be meditation without mysticism and the methods can be applied to schools and workplaces.[84] The internet is full of mindfulness meditation practices that can be done at home. For example, Mental Health Finland offers multiple mindfulness meditation practices on their website, which focus on relaxing or practicing self-compassion.[85] The Finnish Mindfulness Institute offers short

[77] Rautaniemi 2015, 234.
[78] Hintz et al. 2021; Thomas et al. 2019; Park et al. 2015.
[79] Ibid, 25.
[80] Ibid, 26.
[81] Center for Mindfulness. https://mindfulness.fi/tiimimme
[82] Center for Mindfulness. https://mindfulness.fi/tarinamme
[83] Center for Mindfulness. https://mindfulness.fi
[84] Perkkiö 2015
[85] Mitä ovat mindfulness – tietoisuustaidot? https://mieli.fi/fi/mielenterveys/hyvinvointi/mitä-ovat-mindfulness-tietoisuustaidot

courses for those who want to learn mindfulness techniques and they also train mindfulness instructors.[86]

4.2 Meditative practices of the research participants

The majority of the research participants take part in different forms of yoga practice and mix multiple techniques such as yoga and meditation. Examples of these meditative practices are: mindfulness exercises, yoga, meditation, and pranayama (breathing exercises), taking a few conscious breaths, mantras, ice hole swimming, sauna, nature activities, and erotic tantric techniques. Eve is an exception who solely engages in mindfulness meditation. Liam had been practicing meditative techniques for about 15 years but at the time of this research, he had a preference for activities that can be done in nature such as ice hole swimming or relaxing in smoke sauna. Beth is the only participant who also does erotic practices, in addition to yoga and meditation

The research participants carry out these practices in different places such as in a yoga studio, at home, in nature, or even in public transport or at work. In addition, some of the participants do some of the daily activities such as housework and relaxing in a sauna as a form of meditation. While the research participants define their meditative practices in various terms, they attribute many similar meanings and purposes to them. What seems to be valued in meditative practices is that they can meet diverse needs in various situations. For instance, an asana practice may be useful when one has time and energy to do a physical exercise, while taking conscious breaths may be more convenient at work. On the one hand, the research participants seek tangible benefits such as health and wellbeing from these meditative practices. On the other hand, they view them as a pathway for personal growth, which would then help them make better decisions in life and relate to other people more compassionately.

Different practices have different purposes and thus, the research participants' relationships to the practices are dynamic. All participants do the practices on and off and all have years of experience in meditative practices, except for Eve, who has started practicing mindfulness approximately 2.5 months before the first interview.

All five focus group participants also engage in some meditative practices such as yoga, meditation, and mindfulness. The practices are carried out in different places such as

[86] Suomen Mindfulness-instituutti. https://www.mindfulnessinstituutti.com/verkkokurssit

home, gym, outdoors, or certain schools or centers, and every participant has constructed patterns that serve their needs best. The participants associate the practices with overall wellbeing.

4.3 Meditative practices and their spiritual meanings

In this section, I analyze the meanings the participants attach to their practices and how they relate the practices to their spiritual pursuits. I make two central interrelated points. First, the practitioners gain beneficial skills and knowledge from their practices that extend to many aspects of their lives. Second, the benefits they gain from their practices also have spiritual dimensions. The practitioners highlight these dimensions and their concrete outcomes.

Tess has been practicing yoga for approximately ten years in total. At the time of the interview, she has been practicing it regularly for three years. She is soon to be a trained yoga teacher. She uses yoga as an umbrella term that includes practices such as asana practices, breathing exercises also called pranayama, and meditation-techniques that usually enhance awareness. Tess associates her meditative practices with a sense of wellbeing and various positive psychological outcomes. The practice is also a way for her to pursue connection to the universe.

Tess, who has always been a seeker, receives multiple benefits from her practice. She has learned to listen to her needs and stop comparing herself to others, and she feels she has more control over her reactions and emotions. She is more open; she feels positively about her body image; and has acquired better life management skills. Yoga has enhanced her interest in sexual exploration. At time of the research, the focus of her practice was on pranayama. Then Tess was going through a break-up, and she said that the breathing exercises suited her situation then since her energy level was low due to the challenging phase of her life.

For Tess, yoga is not a religion but a holistic way of life that has multidimensional meanings. In her experience, regular physical practice correlates with multiple positive outcomes such as increased mental and physical wellbeing. Tess relates her increased wellbeing to how she relates to other people and the world. She views these meditative practices as spiritual and through them seeks connection to universal energy. Tess describes her spiritual condition by saying that she is "*on a journey*," which means that spirituality as a goal is not stable, but rather it is in constant flux. She believes that the skills and knowledge learned from the practice will transfer to other aspects of life. It signifies

freedom to construct her unique worldview. Tess reports that yoga had, for example, changed her values; she is less attached to material things.

Tess quotes her yoga teacher to explain the meanings she attaches to these practices. "*Asana practice is like building a cup. Breathing exercise is like filling the cup, and meditation practice are like drinking from the cup*." In other words, asana practice keeps her body functioning daily. She describes that her body is like her house, and asana practice cleans this house. Tess describes her experience with asana practices as follows; "*If I never clean my house, I cannot live there anymore at some point, because so much rubbish accumulates there*." Breathing is like opening the windows in her house or pumping air into the tires; it is simply easier to move with full tires. Finally, when feeling good in her body, it is easier to start looking deep inside, and meditation serves that purpose.

Ruth, an educated yoga teacher, has been practicing different forms of yoga, such as ashtanga yoga and yin yoga for nine years. Her meditative practices sometimes also involve just being present. Ruth seeks overall wellbeing from these practices. Sometimes they function as a form of sport or stretching and sometimes they help her to relax or sleep. Another motivation is that they help Ruth to be a better person. For example, the meditative practices enhance Ruth's self-acceptance. Like Tess, she feels less the need to compare herself to other people. The practices help her allow and accept all her feelings and emotions the way they are. The practices help her focus on the present moment and accept herself as an imperfect being. Ruth highlights that because yoga and the values attached to it are not based on competition but rather acceptance, it gives her positive energy. Additionally, when Ruth had a skiing accident in the past, yoga was a significant part of her physical and mental recovery. Thus, she receives multiple tangible benefits from the practices. These meditative practices also facilitate her spiritual growth. Ruth, to whom love is a substantial value, notes that her increased wellbeing has helped her relationships with other people. It increases her ability to cultivate love, be a better person, and treat others well. Additionally, meditation helps her to investigate her inner self and her thoughts. Ruth believes that yoga and meditation practices can lead to higher states of consciousness. For Ruth, spirituality enables her to combine various elements to her worldview. Ruth considers her meditative practices as her personal journey.

Noah has been practicing yoga and meditation for five years, and whenever possible he prefers practicing outdoors. He aims to practice once a day. Noah said if daily practice is not possible, doing even a little is always better than not practicing at all. Noah also participated in a yoga retreat. He describes his daily practice in the retreat as follows: he

starts every morning with two and a half-hour reading from a sacred text; doing the exercise in which the practitioners move the energy in their body; and reciting mantras and relaxing. He pointed out that experiences of meditation have more impact in a group than alone due to the shared experience and energy. He values breathing as a helpful instrument in pursuit of being present when the mind wanders. For Noah, meditative practices are a way to pursue spirituality and train the mind not to be attached to this-worldly matters and attributes about himself. Noah, who believes in reincarnation[87] said the goal of his spiritual practice is not to become a better version of himself although meditation can offer some clarity and thereby ease life. According to Noah, the main point of the practice is to learn to be aware and conscious. Similarly, Eveliina Holm, a yoga, mindfulness, and meditation teacher, who was interviewed in Helsingin Sanomat describes that spirituality is more about "*becoming oneself*" by unearthing one's authentic self instead of just becoming a better version of oneself.[88] For Noah, the practices are a pathway that leads to relinquishing worldly matters, including social norms. Noah gives an example of a narrative he has about himself that, as a man, he must be successful and value financial independence. The spiritual techniques and teachings enable Noah to question this narrative shaped by conventional gender norms.

In addition, Noah's meditative practices have also improved his relationship with his spouse. He has learned, for example, more acceptance. He accepts and appreciates all the characteristics of his spouse, and he has learned he cannot change another person. Noah encourages his spouse to follow her purpose even though it may mean her spending more time at work as a sport coach. Noah aims to be less attached to his desires and seeks harmony through acceptance. Thus, these meditative practices and their spiritual benefits have enabled Noah to have a conscious and authentic relationship with his spouse whereupon they are both free to pursue their individual lives while still being partners. In other words, it seems that the skills and knowledge learned from these practices can be adapted to intimate relationships which may create space for redefining conventional gender and relationship norms.

Liam has been practicing yoga for 15 years on and off. He is strongly attached to nature. He does activities such as ice hole swimming – where he may do a short meditation in the cold water for a few minutes or go to a smoke sauna. Liam seeks physical and mental wellbeing from nature, which he considers a source of spiritual nurturing. He associates a

[87] Kontala in his 2016 dissertation also found that The Experientially Spiritual did not reject the idea of incarnation. See Kontala 2016, 154.

[88] *Uudenlainen henkisyys yleistyy Suomessa, ja se vetoaa etenkin nuoriin naisiin – Eveliina Holmin matka alkoi intiaanināystä*. https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000006238321.html

healthy experience of the body with overall sense of wellbeing. Liam does not engage in meditative practices often anymore. Interestingly, he believes nowadays that one does not actualize spirituality through a set of practices but rather it is a way of being. For Liam, swimming in a cold water or going to a smoke sauna enables him to clear his mind and relax deeply, making him feel like a different person. These experiences that stem from a sense of physical wellbeing offer him peace of mind and a kind of spirituality that allows him to free himself from the demands of a hectic society. Liam says that the brain is a muscle, and by practicing the mind, one can more easily balance chaos and different aspects of life, work, family, friends, etc. He says his most important insight has been that he can experience spirituality in his daily life by being connected to the core of himself, which means being honest with himself. In other words, for Liam, spirituality means being aware of his life and choices and revisiting his worldview when necessary. He seeks spiritual connection in nature and daily life and situations. Liam believes spirituality is the pathway to wellbeing, harmony, and happy life.

Eve has started to practice mindfulness 2,5 months prior to our first interview. She practices different types of mindfulness. Unlike the other spiritual participants, Eve, who believes in Christian God, does not consider her mindfulness practices as a spiritual source and she ascribes to it solely for tangible benefits that she associates with her personal development. She learned about mindfulness from social media when she was unsatisfied with life, The practices have helped her have more self-confidence, and this in turn gave her the courage to pursue her dreams such as studying and making changes in her career. Eve admits that at first, she was unsure whether she could practice mindfulness due to her Christian faith. However, she said she asked permission from God, and now she can safely practice mindfulness for her personal goals in life. Eve said that since the benefits of mindfulness practices have been established by science, she can safely do them. She believes God wants what is best for her.

Beth and Mason, who are religious and spiritual, link their practices strongly to religiosity and spirituality. Beth has been practicing eastern spiritual practices for 20 years and has been teaching them for ten years. She has ample experience in tantric practices and techniques including, erotic tantra, yoga, and meditation For Beth, sexuality and erotic practices are a significant part of her being religious and spiritual. She has found that tantra combined with specific yoga practices have improved her health and wellbeing, including her sexual and menstrual wellbeing. The meditative practices and spiritual way of being are essential in her everyday life since she wants to live in consciousness and love.

Each set of practices serves her in different situations and conditions in life. For instance, when Beth first started yoga, it was a way to take care of herself. Partnered erotic practices are a way to connect with her partner and sometimes tantric techniques are useful to cope at work. Beth reports several positive outcomes from her meditative practices. For example, her versatile meditative practices enable her to live mindfully and pursue spirituality every day. The practices also sparked her desire to belong to a religious community. Like the majority of the participants, at the beginning, yoga was solely a physical practice for Beth. She felt that a more profound meaning was missing from her life. She kept practicing as she e experienced positive results in her psychophysical health. The practice helped her with life management, for example, and it slowly evolved into a deeper and more meaningful form. The first awakening happened when Beth gave birth to her first child after practicing yoga for two years. Beth said she became aware that life does not last forever. Being a mother of three, yoga became a necessary mechanism for self-care.

For Beth, who follows the teachings of Tantra, sexuality and erotic practices are interconnected with spirituality. Turner et al. explains, "Tantra is an art form, a philosophy, and a science that seeks to enable the experience of wholeness and unity." The sexual dimension of Tantra is defined as "Tantric sexuality promotes energy, spirituality, and transcendent transformation." Thus, Turner et al. elucidate that tantric sex is not just a physical and mechanical act, but it has sacred and spiritual dimensions, which undoubtedly is the case with Beth.[89]

Beth undertakes erotic tantric practices such as pelvic floor exercises or techniques to cultivate compassion. For Beth, yoga and erotic practice go hand in hand; yoga is an instrument to cultivate the released energy to wherever she needs. For example, after lovemaking, Beth does a regular yoga or meditation practice to guide energy from the sexual level to others. Beth practices alone and with her partner, since some practices can also be done with a partner, such as the adoration exercise, focusing on the partner's adorable sides. Quite often, their lovemaking is also their mutual spiritual practice. Additionally, sometimes they may pray together or practice gratitude, for instance. Mutual practice with her partner increases intimacy between them and offers them intense experiences. These practices have a positive impact on Beth's intimate relationship and sexual satisfaction.

Currently, the tantric techniques serve her purposes best. However, the practice is not solely an instrument for a better life, but it is valuable in itself. Through her sexuality

[89] Turner et al. 2006, 83.

and the erotic practice, Beth aims to get closer to God, whom she wants to know better. According to Beth, she can experience God's love transmitted to her through her partner in lovemaking. "*The Creator loves whom It has created*." In Beth's experience, the erotic energy is sacred, and when it is used right, it enables one to encounter the Creator. In a sense, religiosity, spirituality, and sexuality are interconnected for her.

This connection between sexuality and meditative practices was also re-iterated by one of the expert interviewees. According to this expert, tantric practices and teachings have the possibility to enhance relationship and sexual satisfaction for they emphasize deep intimacy and calmness.

Undoubtedly, religious ethics and patriarchal values and power have shaped the constructions of female sexuality. Thus, religiosity in the West is associated with "negative constructions of women's sexuality."[90] Daniluk and Browne, however, suggest that positive connections between spirituality and sexuality could be made. They note elements such as "an emphasis on meaning, intuition, self-love, oneness with self, partner, or a universal, or a divine presence, transcendence, transformation, and the erotic as a source of power and healing."[91] Similar notions can be found in Beth's way of thinking about sexuality and spirituality.

Mason, a yoga teacher, started practicing yoga 18 years ago. This includes practices such as asana practices, meditation, and pranayama. Practicing yoga enables Mason to maintain his expertise as a teacher. It also has psychological and physiological benefits. But his primary motivation is to pursue deeper awareness through which he can have spiritual and religious experiences or inner transformation. As mentioned earlier, Mason, starts his meditative practices with a religious ritual or mantra, which he does in front of an altar. According to Mason, change starts from the self, and the practices enable change and transformation.

Mason also associates his intimate relationship with spirituality and personal growth. Mason, who has recently married, says that his relationship with his spouse is one of the most significant spiritual practices. Mason said that his intimate relationship forces him to turn inwards, mirror his thoughts, emotions, and behavior, understanding them better and tracing their source. Furthermore, awareness is a critical element in changing behavior, such as unconsciously learned relationship patterns. Hence, an intimate relationship has the potential to reveal hidden aspects of the self and thus the relationship is related to his growth.

[90] Daniluk & Browne 2008, 131.
[91] Ibid, 131, 133.

Thus, I suggest that the knowledge learned about the self through spiritual practices may have a significant therapeutic value to the practitioner and even to their loved ones. Mason's views echo that of Noah and Beth, both of whom also shed light on their partner's role in their spiritual pursuits and experiences.

Rose, who does not consider herself spiritual, has been practicing mindfulness for nine and yoga for seven years. She calls her lifestyle mindfulness which consists of various practices such as yoga, meditation, and just taking deep breaths when needed. In her university years, Rose participated in research on mindfulness where she did a 20-minute body meditation every day for two months. The positive outcomes in her health made her interested in mindfulness. At the time of research, Rose was doing these practices more or less regularly. She is motivated by the many tangible benefits she gets from mindfulness such as help with stress, insomnia, anxiety, and a sense of relaxation. In addition, she considers mindfulness as a valuable mechanism for her personal growth. Rose reports the philosophy of acceptance that underlines meditative practices helps her relate more positively to other people, and helps her to be more compassionate and less judgmental. She feels she can rely on the practices. She values the concrete tangible benefits she gets from mindfulness. Rose describes that mindfulness is available for her anytime, and she can use the methods whenever she feels the need. Rose describes how she can rely on the meditative practices that offer her protection. The practices help her to cope with life in various situations and deal with emotions. In her words, "*Mindfulness is something that is always there*." She can take a deep breath every time she needs to. Her trust in mindfulness seems to lie in its concrete benefits.

While Rose herself is a non-spiritual meditator, I suggest that her experiences of mindfulness have dimensions that other participants consider spiritual, such as an experience of inner peace, relating more positively to other people, offering inner sense of peace, and an overall positive reflecting framework for her life. Despite Rose's scientific worldview, her mindful way of living has increased her open-mindedness toward religiosity as well. Nowadays, she understands that someone can find a pathway to personal growth in religion, just like she did in mindfulness. She even expresses a little frustration with her slightly dogmatic belief in rationality and science that restrain her from pursuing spirituality.

Julian, another non-spiritual participant, experiences an overall sense of wellbeing from his meditative practices. Julian has been practicing yoga for five years on and off. Julian combines athletic and non-athletic forms of yoga to create a suitable balance. The former functions as a sport, and the latter is for calming. Yoga enhances blood circulation

which Julian considers to be a significant factor in balancing the body, and the mind. In his experience, the body is the key to the wellbeing of the mind.

As discussed earlier, Julian has shown openness towards spiritual attributes, unlike Rose, but he does not link meditative practices and spirituality. The attraction of the practices for him lies in their tangible benefits. Julian emphasizes the wellbeing of the body and mind, but spirituality is not essential for him. However, he believes that the body plays a crucial role in mental wellbeing. In other words, he sees bodily exercises as an instrument to regulate the mind and seek harmony. Julian seeks balance and wellbeing but not spirituality.

To sum up, the meditative practices of the research participants enhance their overall wellbeing which for most of them is also related to their spiritual life. The received benefits touch different aspects of wellbeing, such as physical and mental health, a sense of relaxation, ability to have better relationships, and compassion. The majority of participants note that a key positive outcome is providing them with emotional and spiritual resources that enable them to relate better to people. The meditative practices and the framework attached to them create space for participants to construct diverse practices and rituals. In other words, they provide the participants with the freedom to search for dynamic forms of spirituality that serves their individual needs. Furthermore, the practitioners' relationship to the practices is not static. The participants engage on and off in the meditative practices. They also engage in diverse practices with different techniques that serve diverse situations and conditions in life.

Furthermore, three participants found that their meditative practices nurture and strengthen their intimate relationships. The practices help them live a more authentic life. It would be a fruitful area for further research to examine the relationship between spirituality and intimate relationships from a gender perspective.

Participants, whether non-religious and spiritual, or religious and spiritual participants have a quite similar understanding of the practices after all. All associated the practices with personal growth and development. In other words, meditative practices give them some clarity to make better and more informed decisions in life, follow their values and relate positively to other people.

Moreover, the focus group participants associate the practices with wellbeing. More specifically, the practices are associated with decreased stress levels, relaxation, and taking a break. However, the most participants agree that similar outcomes could be achieved, for instance, by taking a walk or washing the dishes mindfully. Thus, the positive outcomes can come through the practices but also from a way of being. The distinctive value of meditative practices is that there are several options to choose from, and the practice can be

done anywhere. One female participant reflected that the present-day capitalistic society may lead to feelings of meaningless, and the meditative practices may offer some fulfillment. Another female participant suggested that perhaps the practices and the framework they offer are replacing religiosity. The practices are also associated with gaining a better understanding of the self. The atheist participant reported that the practices do not serve any spiritual goals but are solely for herself. Intriguingly, she also commented that she aims to connect with nature, and perhaps mother earth could be her spiritual leader then. A male participant also noted that the starting point is seeking wellbeing, and spirituality is something extra that may come with the practice.

In the following section, I reflect on these findings and situate them in a larger discussion about modern-day forms of non-religious spirituality and their relation to alternative spiritual practices.

The findings of this study corroborate some of the results reported in Kontala. The non-religious who were categorized by Kontala as The Experientially Spiritual typically engage with spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation. Similar to the research participants in this study, they associate these practices with personal development and realizing their full potential. As stated by Kontala:

> "*Rather than feeling adrift, without purpose or goal…, they see the realization of human potentialities to be the goal of life… This is combined with the rejection of religious authorities*."[92]

Similar results were found in my study: The meditative practices of the participants are strongly related to their personal growth. This involves, for example, their personal ethics, their becoming a better partner in intimate relationships and having better quality of life. The skills and knowledge the practitioners learn from their practices seem to extend into many aspects of life. A noteworthy finding is the association between spiritual practice and relationship skills. Three participants associate their spiritual path with their intimate relationships. It would be a fruitful area for further work to examine the role of spirituality in facilitating egalitarian and caring gender relations.

Another characteristic Kontala attaches to The Experientially Spiritual is their search for spiritual experiences (e.g. feeling a connection to nature) and their appreciation of the freedom to choose and make personal decision in an ethical manner. Kontala reports that

[92] Kontala 2016, 152-153.

for these respondents the spiritual dimension and the experiential dimension are not separate, but closely interconnected. The respondents in his study value meaningful experiences combined with "rich inner life." [93] The participants in this study, similarly, seek meaningful and empowering experiences such as connection to nature or universal energy, deep relaxation. A few reported also that sexual experiences are spiritually meaningful for them. Even the non-spiritual Rose shares a lot with the spiritual participants. She seeks meaningful and positive experiences from mindfulness. What makes the boundaries between what the participants perceive as spiritual or non-spiritual in relation to the goals and outcomes from meditative practices is fluid. That is, what is a spiritual goal for one participant might not be for another.

The findings of this study also corroborate some of the results reported by Måns Broo, who researched Finnish yoga teachers. Broo examined the practitioners' views on the practices and what they gain from them.[94] Broo found that his research participants associate, for example, the asana practice with several aspects: "increasing strength of body and mind, giving new perspectives on life, a sense of unity with all of creation, as well as flexibility in dealing with all kinds of people."[95] This study points to similar findings. The participants reported that the practices enable them to regulate their emotions and reactions. Moreover, many reported how the practices help them to relate positively to other people. Like one of Broo's informants who reported how practicing yoga provide them with freedom from the pressure of competitiveness (in dancing), Ruth and Tess in this study also reported that their meditative practices give them a sense of freedom from competitiveness.[96]

The participants in this study reject organized religion as an external authority. They tend to focus on exercising their own agency in constructing their own values and worldview. However, it is not a matter of an oppositional binary between rejected external authority and inner authority, since their internal authority is also shaped by multiple terms of references such as science, philosophy, and new religious understandings. In a way, this speaks to what Broo says in his critique of Heelas and Woodhead who elucidated that spiritual practices are the only authority for the nones. Broo questions the binary of inner and outer authority in the ways in which nones make sense of spiritual practices. On the surface, the research participants in this study can also be seen as emphasizing their own sense of

[93] Ibid, 155.
[94] Broo 2012, 24.
[95] Ibid, 28.
[96] Ibid, 29.

inner authority and agency. However, a closer look suggests that they combine multiple interacting authorities such as meditative practices, philosophy, and science.[97] Especially this is the case with the two religious participants who also combine religious ideas in their worldview and follow certain religious teachings while rejecting others. Thus, their inner authority is shaped by multiple systems of meanings. This corroborates Boo's argument about the complexity of authority that practitioners of meditative practices invoke.

In conclusion, the meditative practices are associated with how the practitioners feel about themselves, physiologically, mentally, and emotionally. The relationship to the practices is not static and a plentiful selection of different practices enable practitioners to choose from different options. Through the meditative practices, the participants construct their own dynamic and flexible spiritual worldviews. They gain skills, knowledge, abilities, that are both material and immaterial resources. These resources enable the personal growth of the practitioners and help them cope with modern challenges and to live meaningful life with nurturing relationships to other people.

[97] Ibid, 31.

5 Conclusion

This thesis investigated what it means for selected Finnish women and men to self-identify as non-religious and spiritual, and how they pursue spirituality through different forms of meditative practices.

The findings of the study show that while the participants reject explicitly the authoritative and definitive nature of religion, their self-identification as non-religious is not a strong identity. Despite rejecting particular attributes in religion, most participants hold the view that the church still plays important role in social welfare. Also, the participants who identify as religious espouse non-conventional and non-dogmatic understanding of being religious, suggesting that the oppositional binary of religious vs. non-religious is not quite accurate and limiting the insights it could suggest. More in-depth research on the various forms of non-religiosity and spirituality is needed.

Furthermore, the participants of this study agree that spirituality is possible without being religious. In fact, many see spirituality as an alternative framework to religion that offers them freedom to construct their own personal worldviews. They also attach multiple meanings to spirituality, such as interconnecting different philosophical outlooks, inner reflection, seeking a personal path, constructing individual worldviews, belief in higher power, intuition, rationality, and compatibility with modern science.

Spirituality is pursued through meditative practices. These practices fulfill for the participants multi-dimensional needs and enable their personal growth. Most notably, they provide them with a framework to pursue freely a unique meaningful life.

Additionally, the results point to a connection between spirituality and meditative practices on the one hand and sexuality and intimate relationships on the other. This is an area that is worthy of further research. In relation to this, it would be also worthwhile to investigate how certain spiritual worldviews shape understanding about gender norms. Another interesting area for further research would be how class, gender, race, and religious background shape meditative practices.

One limitation of this study is the small number of interviewees since I could not have access to more people. Also, the men have been interviewed only once in this study while women are interviewed twice since they were more available. This limitation was partly caused by the change of research plans. Initially, I had planned to study sexual wellbeing and spirituality, but it was not feasible at the time for a number of reasons. I then changed the research focus, but in the process lost some time.

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